

CASE STUDY: ADVANCING COMPASSION THROUGH THE SCHWARTZ ROUNDS® PROGRAM IN A HEALTHCARE INSURANCE SETTING

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare industry has recognized the critical importance of compassionate care in traditional hospital settings, but there is also a growing need for emotional support and human connection that extends beyond hospital walls. As healthcare delivery becomes increasingly complex and decentralized, the professionals who work behind the scenes face their own unique challenges.

Health insurance case managers occupy a particularly complex position in the care continuum, serving as intermediaries between patient members and insurers. These roles often involve processing deeply personal and traumatic situations, managing difficult conversations with frustrated patients and providers, and making decisions that can significantly impact patients' lives and well-being. Despite the emotional weight of this work, insurance companies often lack the type of support systems commonly found in hospitals, leaving staff to process their experiences in isolation.

The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare has begun to address this gap by expanding our foundational Schwartz Rounds program beyond traditional hospital settings into other sectors. By adapting our proven model to meet the unique needs of health insurance workers, the Schwartz Center is pioneering a new approach to supporting the emotional well-being of all healthcare workers, regardless of whether they provide direct patient care.

The Schwartz Center recently hosted a roundtable discussion on the successful implementation of the Schwartz Rounds program at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (BCBSMA), demonstrating how this innovative adaptation can transform organizational culture, enhance employee well-being, and ultimately improve outcomes for both their staff and patient members.

The discussion featured Schwartz Center CEO **Michael Gustafson, MD, MBA**, and three participants in the BCBSMA Schwartz Rounds program: **Marsie Nicotera, LMHC**, senior program manager, **Elyce Kearns, MD, MPH**, child and adult psychiatrist and medical director of mental health (retired), **Mary Anne McKendall, MD**, physician advisor, care management.



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UNIQUE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHWARTZ ROUNDS PROGRAM

After a particularly traumatic case involving a family struggling to cope in the aftermath of a domestic violence incident, BCBSMA staff members realized that they were absorbing significant emotional trauma without adequate support mechanisms.

This became a catalyst for reshaping how BCBSMA thought about employee well-being and emotional support. BCBSMA decided to implement the Schwartz Rounds program for the more than 500 employees in its Health and Medical Management division.

The Schwartz Rounds program is a proven, time-tested initiative unlike any other offered to healthcare organizations. By providing healthcare workers with the dedicated time and space to discuss the emotional challenges of their jobs, this unique program increases their capacity for compassion and enables them to provide better care for patients. The program is now offered in nearly 800 healthcare organizations around the world.

“The Schwartz Rounds are really about talking about the experience of doing the work. It’s not about the nuts and bolts—the timeline, who did what, the sequence of events, and all those details. It’s really about what the experience was like.”

– **Elyce Kearns, MD, MPH**

SCHWARTZ ROUNDS IN A REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Due to pandemic constraints, BCBSMA developed a successful virtual Schwartz Rounds model that has proven remarkably effective. With support from company leadership, their planning committee launched a virtual program that regularly accommodates 100-150 remote participants.

The virtual format integrates chat functionality alongside verbal discussion, allowing broader participation from team members who may not feel comfortable speaking aloud or appearing on camera. Each session includes careful pre-session preparation with designated storytellers, comprehensive resource sharing for ongoing support, and mindful closing moments designed to help participants transition back to their regular work responsibilities. This virtual approach has transformed isolating work experiences into a powerful community-building tool.



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KEY TOPICS AND IMPACT

Over their four years of implementation, the BCBSMA team has conducted approximately 20 sessions addressing challenging themes that resonate deeply with their staff. Sessions attract an average of 100-125 attendees and have explored topics ranging from supporting patients long-term with chronic conditions, managing difficult communications with frustrated patients and healthcare providers, and processing traumatic member situations.

The sessions have also focused on building meaningful connections across different departments and celebrating the positive aspects of their work through dedicated sessions on gratitude, kindness, and joy in healthcare. These topics reflect the unique challenges faced by healthcare insurance professionals who often serve as intermediaries in complex, emotionally charged situations.

“During this particular discussion, one of our senior leaders shared a story. If I’m being honest, I don’t really remember the specifics of the story, but what I remember was the strength and vulnerability they showed while sharing. Everyone’s on an even playing field during Schwartz Rounds. I think this was a perfect demonstration of that principle, and this senior leader’s sharing gave everyone permission going forward to feel comfortable being vulnerable and emotionally open. It’s great to have leadership modeling that in such a supportive environment.”

– **Marsie Nicotera, LMHC**

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

The implementation has yielded significant and measurable improvements in organizational culture and staff well-being. There has been increased cross-departmental collaboration, with utilization managers more frequently consulting with care managers and behavioral health clinicians.

Staff have developed enhanced emotional support networks, with colleagues regularly reaching out to check on each other after particularly challenging sessions. Leadership participation has increased vulnerability and emotional modeling throughout the organization, creating psychological safety for all team members.

Employees report greater understanding of their colleagues’ work experiences, with some non-clinical staff members gaining their first real insight into the emotional complexity of case management work. The program has fostered stronger team cohesion and mutual support systems that extend well beyond the formal meeting times.



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CONCLUSION

The expansion of the Schwartz Rounds program into new settings represents a critical evolution in addressing burnout and emotional support across the entire healthcare continuum. As healthcare delivery continues to diversify beyond traditional hospital walls, programs like Schwartz Rounds become essential for maintaining the human connection at the heart of healing while supporting the well-being of all healthcare workers, and ultimately, for patients.